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ABSTRACT

Each new media revolution forces adjustments for both the producers of messages and the receivers of those messages. Integral to the communication process is an understanding of what it means to be literate in an eclectic communication environment and of how the new media may enhance or impede literacy. An important premise for this discussion is that there must be a correlation between two concepts: what it means to be "media literate" (savvy to the processes and protocol of the media) and what it means to be "literate through media" (using the media as conduits to achieve heightened proficiencies in the basic literacy skills of reading, writing and comprehension). "Surfing" one of the incarnations of the new media, the Internet, a researcher asked six respondents questions about literacy and computers. The respondents were two university administrators, two media managers/publishers, a corporate librarian, and an independent writer/teacher. Responses, thought not scientifically solicited, were revealing, and, in may ways, closely reiterated the Electronic Frontier Foundation's co-founder John Barlow's vision of the transformation of information from product to process. Questions ranged from what media the respondents had encountered through their jobs to how they would define literacy and whether they thought it was in need of redefinition in light of the new media. Most significant results showed that the respondents believed that media and literacy, whether old or new, all involve one thing: the transmittal of information. This transmittal calls for basic skills like the ability to read and write and think critically. (Includes 4 tables of data; contains 12 references.) (TB)

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New Media Literacy: From Classroom To Community

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New Media Literacy: From Classroom To Community

Introduction

Each semester, I face the daunting task of teaching beginning college students an introductory course about the media. Increasing the challenges of such a task are underscored the amorphous boundaries of the subject matter itself. And this reality is easily highlighted by the fact that some portion of the new information in even the most progressive textbooks become outdated before a semester is over. Financial transactions and new product launches are the biggest culprits, creating partnerships in unlikely places.

Each new media revolution forces new adjustments for both producers of messages altered by inventive forms and receivers, who must correctly interpret such messages. Integral to this process is an understanding of what it means to be literate in such an eclectic communication environment, as well as how the new media may enhance, or impede, literacy.

An important premise for this discussion is that there must be a correlation between two concepts: what it means to be "media literate," or savvy to the processes and protocol of the media, and "literate through media," or using the media as conduits to achieve heightened proficiencies in the basic literacy skills of reading, writing and comprehension. This paper suggests that the basic rhetorical aims of communication to inform, persuade and entertain become amplified by the new media. Views from contemporary users and planners of new media services, an argument for the redefinition of information from product to activity, and some consideration of obstacles to access will frame this paper's discussion.

Past Contexts

As media merge, the parameters traditionally defining print and electronic texts collapse upon themselves. Extraordinary technological advances during the 20th century have ushered in tremendous paradigm shifts which call into question previously-held ideas about the form, function and appearance of human communication existing for well over two millennia.

In fact, to consider the new media as part of a continuum of human communication most correctly illumines key similarities and striking differences between the past and the imminent future. As George Kennedy points out, evidence recovered from antiquity indicates that fledgling forms of writing which developed in Mesopotamia as early as 4000 BC, spurred an important shift from oral to written communication by offering a means for the broader dissemination of ideas and a greater "permanence" of thought. (108)

Rudimentary picture writings, ideograms and cuneiform preserved on stone-like surfaces allowed early authors to preserve texts in a newer "medium" than air. In class, I show students early forms of writing and discuss cultural contexts which might have made communication a priority. Together, we note that by 3400 BC, well before the threshold of what we describe as "modern times," Egyptian scribes refined a system of writing that incorporated five types of hieroglyphs. Could the crude stone carvings and papyrus etchings be considered a type of "printing?" Perhaps. Independently of this progression, China had developed its own highly successful system of information dispersal using ink-block printing first in stone then in wood onto a thin, rice-like paper.

Then, we discover that it was the evolution of the 20 characters of the Classical Greek alphabet by 200 BC which created a symbolic system with as much responsibility for the introduction of mass printing from moveable metal type in 1450 as did the actual technology. For this was a syllabary poised to form the underpinnings of the Modern European alphabet of 26 letters, creating a concise vocabulary adaptable to the metal type technology.

By the time German inventor Johannes Gutenberg modified wooden systems with more durable metal castings and moveable characters, it adapted well to European language systems

comprising far fewer characters than the Chinese multi-thousand member alphabet. Out of the widespread use of this singular invention, western societies were poised to venture into a veritable information explosion. The modern mass medium of print was born, in turn spawning periodicals, broadsides, books, magazines and newspapers (Vivian 36). Marshall McLuhan's characterization of this phenomenon as "The Gutenberg Galaxy" underscores the tremendous impact of this new medium. Though McLuhan is most often remembered for his admonitions about the profound effects of the electronic media upon society, his observations about television were predicated upon a comparison of the shift from orality to print. (385) However, for all of us concerned with technology and communication, recognizing the historic and cultural imperatives which have ecouraged civilizations from antiquity on to improve techniques for transferring information helps accentuate even more the profound divide before us.

Divisions and Reconfigurations

For much of the 20th century, communication theorists comfortably divided mass media into pretty discrete categories of print and electronic components. But even as early as the 1950s when cable TV was in its infancy and proving that a microwave satellite dish was as capable of delivering television signals as were electrical impulses, the neat lines of division among media were crumbling.

Today's media landscape is much more complex; tomorrow's is virtually unfathomable. No longer accurate to define media by the way information is packaged or transmitted, we should re-evaluate criteria for assessing new media. In one sense, the history of human communication is very much a chronicle of the processes through which information is transferred.

John Barlow, co-founder and executive chair of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, argues that a reconfiguration of how we define "information" will be a natural consequence of the ever-burgeoning parameters of the new media. He describes three new axioms about the character of information -- as "activity," as "life form" and as "relationship" -- which may radically change our

notions of who owns it, and who has access to it. Characterizing information through these axioms as process not product, Barlow envisions an environment where information will be experienced more than learned, will be disposable through its own evolution, and finally, will gain value through familiarity, not scarcity. (89-91).

Few institutions could be more central to the changing values of information and literacy than libraries, schools and the media. Surfing one of the incarnations of the new media, the Internet, I asked questions about literacy, media and us. Responses, though not scientifically solicited, were revealing, and in many ways, closely reiterated Barlow's vision of the transformation of information from product to process.

First, I asked the respondents, who included two university administrators, two media managers/publishers, a corporate librarian and an independent writer/teacher, to describe the "new" forms of media they had encountered through their jobs within the last five years. If they interacted with affiliates or member institutions, they were asked to include that data into their responses, too. While many media were mentioned, the most oft- repeated "new" medium of information transfer was electronic mail, followed by strong indications of reliance upon fax, CD-ROMs, and gopher access to other information sources:

Table 1 New Media Used By Respondents' Institutions Since 1990

Bulletin Boards		1
CD-ROM		3
E-mail	7	
Fax		3
Freenet	1	
FTP (File Transfer Protocol)	1	
Gopher Server	3	
Internet		1
Laptop		1
Projection unit & Overhead		1
Teleconferencing		1
Usenet Newsgroup		1
Voice-mail		1
World-Wide WEB	2	

Predicting the future is a precarious enterprise, and doubly so when considering the future of technology. I asked respondents to project what their own technology needs for their institutions might be five years from now, and while their responses were fewer, they showed some clearer patterns. The most striking to me, combining the repeated indications that pages on the World Wide Web, products using CD-ROM capabilities, and accessories with scanning abilities, are that these experts expect that information currently in "print" formats will eventually be transformed to an electronic, computer accessible format. Ownership of information will concurrently shift from those who own tangible products, such as books and newspapers, to those who will understand how to navigate the electronic pathways to information, for the "products" in the ever-expanding cyberspace regions are not bounded by the spatial limitations of bookshelves and tabletops:

Table 2 Emerging Technologies Respondents' Institutions Expect To Use To Deliver Information By Year 2000

ATM standards (for broader bandwidth, multimedia info)	2	
Cable company to computer access	1	
CD-ROM Publication	2	
Electronic Document Delivery		1
High Density TV (HDTV) to PC capability	1	
Intelligent Agents	1	
Optical Scanning (text & graphics)	1	
WWWEB Publications		3

Cost, efficiency and expectation are three main types of reasons these respondents cited as primary ones impelling their institutional shifts to new media:

Table 3 Reasons Why Respondents' Institutions Will Use New Media

Cost-effective
- offsets costs of traditional publishing, advertising
- cheaper to reach mass audiences
- hardware is already in place (builds on current technological capabilities)

Quality
- offers more information
- format more attractive, offers better readability
- reliable
- easy to learn

Greater Public Expectation
- young people especially will already be familiar with it

Historically, the economy of any medium offering a great deal of information to a great number of people at less cost than previous methods has always been an irresistible lure impelling wide scale use and adoption of new media. However, economic benefits parallel access, and the "success" of previous media have thrived in proportion to their close to universal presence.

If, as these respondents suggest, the future of information will be computer-dependent, serious access questions exist for whole segments of our society, those whom one researcher describes as the "informationally-impoverished":

> In order for the production and distribution of information to become more democratic, we must make several major changes to the way information is handled in our society. First public access must reach out as wide(ly) as possible. Information must not be available only on a pay-for-access basis. We must bridge the gap between the informationally-privileged and the informationally-impoverished. (9)

Public schools, often touted as the common frontier where tomorrow's communicators can learn to manage the processes of information, may be hindering, rather than helping access. This

same study describes situations where the presence and active use of computers in schools may not guarantee comparable learning opportunities:

> Even when computers are available in schools, all children are not afforded the same level of access to the information that the computers make available. For example, in affluent schools, computers are often used to teach programming, generalization skills and many of the more technical applications, in addition to being used for drill and practice. In contrast, computers are used in inner-city schools mostly for drill and practice. In all schools, children of professionals are most likely to use computers to learn programming and more technical applications, while the children of non-professionals are most likely to use the computer for drill and practice. (6)

Perhaps the distinction between having a computer for drill and using the same tool for programming seems slight, particularly when measured against the option of not having a computer at all. However, the respondents I queried had some thoughtful observations about the possible intersection between literacy and new media. Specifically, I asked them to think about what it meant in their view to be "literate," and if the presence of new media changed that definition.

Like good taste, literacy seems hard to define but easy to recognize. These respondents agreed that the concept of literacy needed no redefinition because the parameters of basic literacy, in their view, didn't change; reading, writing and the ability to interpret what's written remained critical skills. And, when asked whether the "new media" could encourage proficiency in basic literacy, all respondents were doubtful. Only one even conceded any potential impact, surmising that new media might make learning basic skills "more exciting" (perhaps this view is what encourages schools to rely upon computers for drills).

Yet when they described what characteristics "literate" people in a new media environment would need, skills identified were not confined to reading, writing and interpretative skills. I

separated them into two sets of skills, ones based upon written skills and those based upon electronic skills:

Table 4 Respondents' Important Components of Literacy

Print-Based Literacy
- Ability to Read
- Ability to Comprehend Reading
- Ability to Write

Electronic-Based Literacy
- Computer Skill
- CD-ROM Knowledge
- Vocabulary of Technical Terms
- Information Retrieval Techniques (on-line, Internet, CD-ROM)

Conclusion

Media, whether new or old, all involve one thing: the transmittal of information. Media formats alter the format of information, changing what it looks like, sounds like and acts like. Most importantly, the new media will force changes in our view of information, shifting emphases from product to process.

Who will own the right-of-way on the ever-expanding information highway? Access increasingly will not be a question of who can get the information product, but how many of us can get involved in the information process.

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Dr. Meta G. Carstarphen, assistant professor of Journalism at the University of North Texas in Denton, was selected as a 1993 CCCC "Scholar For The Dream" for her research on race, rhetoric and the media. Dr. Carstarphen has completed research on media influences upon African American and Korean American business owners in Dallas.